# *Savior Nation: Woodrow Wilson and the Gospel of Service*

**Richard M. Gamble**
*Palm Beach Atlantic College*

*Imperialism as idolatry.*

Augustine's *City of God* identifies pride and humility as the founding principles of the City of Man and the City of God.[1] Leaving no mystery as to the identity of the most recent embodiment of the arrogant City of Man in his own day, Augustine quotes two significant lines from Virgil's *Aeneid*. The famous passage from Virgil's epic concerns Rome's perfection of the "imperial arts" and its boast of its unique, divinely appointed mission to "beat down the proud." Throughout the *Aeneid*, Virgil reinforces Rome's historical mission. Father Jupiter himself had appointed Rome to found a universal, everlasting kingdom of peace, justice, and righteousness, leading history to its final destination, a new Age of Saturn in which the temple of war would be shut and law and order prevail throughout the inhabited world.[2] In *The City of God*, however, Augustine seeks to undermine these pretensions. Humbling the proud is God's prerogative, not Rome's. It is a mission that Rome has falsely "claimed as its own."[3] Such grandiose aspirations made Rome nothing less than an impostor City of God, a sham Eternal City, appropriating to itself the mission that belongs exclusively to Christ's kingdom, whose founder is not Aeneas but God himself. To invest imperial Rome with the love and honor and

[1] Augustine, *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, translated by Henry Bettenson and introduced by John O'Meara (New York: Penguin, 1984), 5.

[2] Virgil, *The Aeneid*, translated by Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Vintage Classics, 1983), passim.

[3] Augustine, *City of God*, 5.

worship due to God alone is, in Augustine's profound theological analysis, nothing less than idolatry.

*American expansionism shaped by many influences.*

Rome, of course, has not been the only nation to succumb to the idolatry of empire, nor is the idea of national mission unique to its successor empires in the West. Civilizations from the ancient world to the modern, whether European or Asian or American, Christian and non-Christian alike, have possessed a conviction of divine calling and destiny. Variations on this impulse have been evident in cultures as diverse as Confucian China, Hellenistic Greece, Augustan Rome, Ottoman Turkey, Romanov Russia, Victorian Britain, and Wilsonian America. America's own idea of mission is an amalgam of Roman, Puritan, Enlightenment, Romantic nationalist, social gospel, and modern imperialist elements, and the precise sources of its images, symbols, metaphors, and vocabulary are therefore often difficult to untangle. Moreover, it has been shaped not only by its own historical experience, theological roots, and political ideology, but also by the expectations of outsiders, like the radicals of the French and English Enlightenment who projected their hopes for universal redemption onto the emerging United States in the 1770s and 1780s. To the mind of Richard Price, for example, the American Revolution ranked second only to the incarnation of Christ and was perhaps "the most important step in the progressive course of human improvement."[4]

America has wrestled throughout its history with a particularly robust and complex sense of divine appointment and of "Manifest Destiny." From the holy community of New England Puritanism, to the exceptionalism of the Founders, to the outward-directed millennial fervor of Abolitionism before and during the Civil War, the American redemptive myth has been woven together out of many strands. This habit of mind has been examined by intellectual, literary, and diplomatic historians who have traced an ongoing self-consciousness among Americans of being an Adam in a "New Eden" or a covenantal people in a "New Israel."[5] Drawing

[4] Jack P. Green, ed., *Colonies to Nation: A Documentary History of the American Revolution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 424.

[5] On the history of the companion ideas of Manifest Destiny and mission see Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of National Expansionism in American History* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1963); Edward McNall Burns, *The American Idea of Mission: Concepts of National Purpose and Destiny* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1957); Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission*

from Puritan, Enlightenment, and Romantic ideology, American literature and political discourse from Colonial times to the present has been permeated by themes of renewal and redemption, of covenantal duty, of deliverance from Europe and the past, of America as the embodiment of an "idea" more than as a place or a political community.

*Wilson's view of national mission owed much to Revolutionary France.*

Not least among significant American leaders who inherited but also helped transform the the American ideal of mission and Manifest Destiny was Woodrow Wilson. He was transfixed by the notion of a national mission, and variations on this theme dominate his speeches. His sense of divine calling has generally been attributed to his Puritan and Calvinist upbringing, rich sources indeed for the idea of a chosen people and a national covenant. But his speeches also teem with principles, images, and language much closer to Revolutionary France, to nineteenth-century Romantic nationalism, and to the contemporary social gospel's fusion of the spheres of church and state and the realms of the City of God and the City of Man. There is in Wilson's vision of national destiny as much of Guiseppe Mazzini's millennial kingdom of world "association" as there is of John Winthrop's "City on a Hill." Indeed, while making his way to the Paris Peace Conference in January 1919, Wilson stopped in Genoa, Italy, to pay tribute to the Italian nationalist and champion of world "association." Inspired by the sight of a monument to Mazzini, Wilson remarked publicly that he felt he was "taking some small part in accomplishing the realization of the ideals to which his life and thought were de-

*in American History: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966); Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968); Conrad Cherry, ed., *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971); Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt, *The Myth of the West: America As the Last Empire*, translated by Herbert H. Rowen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995); Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995); Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). On literary themes see David W. Noble, *The Eternal Adam and the New World Garden: The Central Myth in the American Novel Since 1830* (New York: George Braziller, 1968). On the redemptive rhetoric and imagery of the Civil War, see James H. Moorhead, *American Apocalypse: Yankee Protestants and the Civil War, 1860-1869* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978) and Charles Royster, *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), especially chapter 6, "The Vicarious War."

voted." When the mayor of Genoa presented Wilson with a bound set of Mazzini's works, the President acknowledged that he had "already derived guidance from the principles which Mazzini so eloquently expressed."[6] Armed with these and other potent revolutionary principles, Wilson moved America away from thinking of itself as simply a "New Eden" or a "New Israel" toward the Romantic, Progressive, social-gospel ideal of America as the "Christ-Nation."

*American foreign policy traditionally was non-ideological.*

To understand what difference this might make, it is important to distinguish between mission on the one hand as simply a nation's perception of itself as superior to others and as having been singled out by destiny, or history, or God for special blessing, and mission on the other hand as an outward-directed, salvific crusade, that leads a nation to conceive of itself as "the instrument for the redemption of the world."[7] In the first case, mission can actually look more to the past than to the future; it can be conservative, guided by a sense of duty to preserve principles and institutions rather than overturn them, animated by a conviction of being the guardian of a tradition. It can also be outwardly benign toward its neighbors (although domestically, of course, minority opinion or others on the "losing side" of a nation's history can suffer terribly). Such a nation may even boast of national glory, and destiny, and progress, and still not be willing to crusade to extend its mission beyond its borders. Both the United States in its first century as a nation (despite Manifest Destiny) and the Russian empire for much of its history fit into this first category. America was generally content to remain true to the wisdom of the Founders and to pursue a non-ideological, non-interventionist foreign policy to suit this conception of its place in the world, while Russia believed that it had been called to preserve intact for the future the Roman and Christian legacy of the Byzantine East[8] and the triple bequest of Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Mother Russia.

It is possible for the second, outward-directed manifestation of mission also to be restrained and benign under certain circumstance, namely, if a nation believes it best achieves its redemptive

[6] "Remarks about Guiseppe Mazzini" and "Further Remarks in Genoa," 5 January 1919, Arthur S. Link, et al., eds. *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966-1993), 53: 614, 615. Hereafter cited as *PWW*.

[7] Burns, *The American Idea of Mission*, 4.

[8] See Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 134-135.

*Force of example* vs. *"uplift" by force.*

mission through example alone. But more typically an "expansive" mission is predatory, universalist, and even revolutionary. It fulfills its mission by active engagement, by intervention, by outright conquest, or by the forced spread of its ideology and institutions. Historian Edward McNall Burns was correct to warn nearly fifty years ago that "if a people already feel that they have been endowed by God or by nature with talents surpassing those of their neighbors, they will almost inevitably conclude that it is their destiny to redeem or to dominate their inferior brethren."[9] To be sure, such national hubris (or racism) can lead to an aggressive foreign policy. But the key word in Burns's comment is almost. An interventionist foreign policy is not the inevitable result of a nation's consciousness of being a "New Eden" or "New Israel." The habit of interventionism does, however, follow necessarily from a nation's consciousness of being the messianic "Christ-Nation" anointed for world redemption and eagerness to deny the same status to any other nation.

From the Founding through the nineteenth century, the American people wrestled with these two notions of mission, between the "New Eden" and the "New Israel," some would say, but really between both of these and the "Christ-nation." As Burns summarizes this tension in the American soul:

> On the one hand, they have considered themselves a peculiar people, separated by thousands of miles from the homeland of their fathers, and hating the wicked and irrational ways of Europe. In accordance with this line of thinking, the Old World has been synonymous with oppression, tyranny, and crafty and cynical diplomacy. On the other hand, Americans have conceived of their Republic as the handmaid of Destiny, as a chosen nation with a mission to guide and instruct and even to rule "savage and servile" peoples. To accomplish such a mission it would be necessary for America to express her sympathy with the victims of repression, to intervene to assist them, and even to overthrow autocratic and militaristic regimes that stood as obstacles to the spread of liberty and civilization.[10]

By the end of the nineteenth century, the decision had largely been made in favor of America as the "Christ-Nation." Imperialists like Josiah Strong, Albert J. Beveridge, Alfred Thayer Mahan, Theodore Roosevelt, and many others combined themes of racial

[9] Burns, *The American Idea of Mission*, 187.

[10] *Ibid.*, 256.

superiority, civilizational duty, and social "uplift" into an extraordinarily dynamic vision of national destiny. Beveridge, for example, expected nothing less than "the regeneration of the world" through American expansion.[11] Indeed, by the 1890s, according to historian Walter McDougall, the world-redemptive mission of America had clearly triumphed over the older ideal of American exceptionalism and neutrality.[12] As historian Anders Stephanson similarly concluded, Wilson's intention "to push the world along by means of regenerative *intervention*" won out, at least for the time being, over American separatism and non-interventionism.[13] It is this crusading mission that carried the U.S. into the Great War in 1917.

*From neutrality to role as "Christ nation."*

On any topic in his public addresses, Wilson was remarkably consistent in his use of themes, vocabulary, and metaphors, a sign either of a well-developed rhetorical strategy or of a mind given easily to clichés and comfortable verbal ruts. Because of this consistency it is possible to trace the pattern and development of his ideas across the eight years of his presidency. Words like "service" and "selfishness"—key words in the Progressive dictionary—appear frequently in his speeches, as do images of the theater (play, stage, drama, actors), a gnostic fascination with the combat between spirit and matter and with metaphors of light and dark, cobbled together with odds and ends from the Bible, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the speeches of Abraham Lincoln. Much of this language and its intensity were not unique to Wilson, of course. Beveridge could match or surpass anything Wilson put together, and particular words and phrases like "international righteousness" were heard as frequently from Teddy Roosevelt as from Wilson. Wilson's rhetoric is important not because of his originality as a thinker but because of the way he combined themes, carried them consistently through years of speech-making, and, above all, because of his position of national leadership at a monumentally critical moment in American history. He knew the power of language and obviously believed he could shape the national consciousness through his rhetoric, helping to determine the way

[11] See any number of Beveridge's speeches, but especially "The March of the Flag" (available in several anthologies) and "The Star of Empire," in Conrad Cherry, ed., *God's New Israel*, 140-153.

[12] McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State*, 74-75.

[13] Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, xii.

Americans understood themselves, their enemies, and the meaning of world events.

*"Service" Wilson's all-purpose excuse for exerting power.*

While Wilson occasionally used the actual terms "mission" and "Manifest Destiny" in reference to America's duty,[14] especially in reference to global democracy, he most commonly spoke of America's "service" to the world. "Service" could easily appear half a dozen times in just a few paragraphs of one of Wilson's speeches. He could infuse the most mundane topics with transcendent significance. In a single speech on the tariff in 1913, for example, Wilson managed in the space of a few paragraphs to mention "common service," "great service," and "service to the utmost."[15] This kind of repetition held true before, during, and after the war. Domestically, his ideal of service pictured government ministering to the needs of its people, but even then he tied the ideal to the needs of an abstract "humanity." In his First Inaugural (March 4, 1913)—one of his more lucid speeches—he referred eloquently to the need for government to be "put at the service of humanity" to achieve social justice.[16] But more often, and more significantly for the role of the United States in world affairs, Wilson's constant appeal to the gospel of "service" was a way of imagining America as a friend drawing up alongside helpless peoples and ministering to their needs—an international Good Samaritan with all the world for a neighbor.

*Mexico invaded "to serve mankind."*

Wilson's expansive vision of world service was evident in his speeches long before the United States entered the Great War in 1917 and well before most Americans knew where Sarajevo was on the map or who the heir to the Austrian throne could possibly be. At a memorial service in May 1914 for U.S. marines killed in military action at Veracruz, the President explained in a speech brimming with the language of "duty" and "service" and "self-sacrifice," that Americans "have gone down to Mexico to serve mankind if we can find out the way. We do not want to fight the Mexicans. We want to serve the Mexicans if we can. . . ." Wilson envisioned the United States as a "friend" coming to aid its neighbor in time of need, and reassured his audience that "a war of ser-

[14] He used both words in his Eighth Annual Message to Congress, 7 December 1920, *PWW*, 66: 485.

[15] "An Address on Tariff Reform to a Joint Session of Congress," 8 April 1913, *PWW*, 27: 269-72.

[16] "The First Inaugural Address," 4 March 1913, *PWW*, 27: 150.

vice is a thing in which it is a proud thing to die."[17] The next month he told a crowd assembled for the unveiling of the Confederate memorial at Arlington National Cemetery that he longed for a pure, united nation, willing to "stand shoulder to shoulder to lift the burdens of mankind in the future and to show the paths of freedom to all the world."[18] The American flag itself, he said a few days later, stands for "the right of one nation to serve the other nations of the world."[19] It was an easy step from this conception of the ideal of service to obligatory military intervention in the name of that benevolent service; indeed, it soon became clear that, for Wilson, service was the handiest explanation for war and intervention.

*Slanted neutrality followed by entry into war.*

Once war came to Europe in the summer of 1914, Wilson continued to look forward to the day of America's opportunity for world service and the realization of America's destiny, even while he professed neutrality. The sincerity of Wilson's neutrality has been questioned in light of the United States' heavy financial, material, and diplomatic aid to Britain and France from 1914 onward, but even in his promises of neutrality Wilson talked expectantly of a special kind of American intervention. While pledging official U.S. neutrality in August 1914 (and asking the American people to remain "impartial in thought as well as in action"), Wilson presented the image of a nation holding itself not aloof, but in reserve, "as a friend" ready to help; in the meantime America had to keep "itself fit and free to do what is honest and disinterested and truly serviceable for the peace of the world."[20] Similarly, as he accepted the Democratic Party's renomination in 1916, he reminded his enthusiastic audience that the United States was neutral not so much on behalf of its own safety but in order to "seek to serve mankind by reserving our strength and our resources" for the recovery of peace once the war was over. And in this same speech, the candidate who would soon be campaigning on the slogan "He Kept Us Out of War" warned that continued neutrality was impossible when the peace of the world was at stake. "We are to play a leading part in the world drama whether we wish it or not," he con-

[17] "Address at Brooklyn Navy Yard," 11 May 1914, *PWW*, 30: 14.

[18] "Address at Arlington," 4 June 1914, *PWW*, 30: 142.

[19] "Flag Day Speech," 15 June 1914, *PWW*, 30: 186.

[20] "American Neutrality—An Appeal By the President," 19 August 1914, John Randolph Bolling, et al., eds., *Chronology of Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1927), 191-192.

cluded.[21] For Wilson, even neutrality had to be defined in terms of American mission; neutrality could not be defined in such a way as to deny America its role on the world stage.

Wilson made the supposed impossibility of the nation refraining from service even clearer in his speeches as he moved America toward intervention soon after his reelection. In his famous "Peace Without Victory" speech of January 22, 1917—delivered more than a week before Germany announced resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare—he told the U.S. Senate that he could not imagine "that the people of the United States should play no part in the great enterprise" of laying the foundations of peace. "They cannot in honor withhold the service to which they are now about to be challenged"—a service he defined as helping "to guarantee peace and justice throughout the world."[22] Honor did not mean protecting American lives and property as much as it did serving others; service had to be rendered once the opportunity presented itself. The Christ-Nation could not refrain. In his Second Inaugural Address (March 5, 1917) he rounded out this logic by claiming that "we have always professed unselfish purpose and we covet the opportunity to prove that our professions are sincere."[23] To Wilson's mind, active service to the world would prove American sincerity and selflessness.

Wilson's sentimental ideal of service shaped his attitude toward war and peace in yet another important way. Service enabled America to go to war without a trace of self-centeredness, as a "disinterested" associate simply performing its duty, unmotivated by material interests. In his War Message (April 2, 1917) he vowed that America had "no selfish end to serve," fought "without rancour and without selfish object," and acted "without animus," without "enmity," and as "the sincere friend of the German people."[24] In June 1917, two months after the American declaration of war, Wilson explained his creed to a group of Presbyterian ministers: "I believe if ever a nation purged its heart of improper

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[21] "A Speech in Long Branch, New Jersey, Accepting the Presidential Nomination," 2 September 1916, *PWW*, 38: 132, 137.

[22] Excerpted in Richard Hofstadter and Beatrice K. Hofstadter, eds. *Great Issues in American History: From Reconstruction to the Present Day, 1864-1981* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 198-203.

[23] "The Second Inaugural Address," 5 March 1917, *PWW*, 41: 374.

[24] "An Address to a Joint Session of Congress," 2 April 1917, *PWW*, 41: 525, 526.

motives in a war, this nation has purged its heart. . . ."[25] In presenting the Treaty of Versailles to the Senate in 1919, moreover, he once again claimed (perhaps protesting too much) that America acted for "no private interest," as "disinterested friends" and "unaffected champions."[26]

Although a combatant, the United States achieved in Wilson's imagination a unique and exalted status in the whole sordid history of rivalry among empires and nations. Because of its mission of selfless devotion and service to others, America would not be motivated primarily by fear, or interests, or even so much by honor—all the timeless reasons for war as articulated by Thucydides and Hobbes.[27] Not safety just for one's own, but security for everyone. Not glory, but redemption of others. Not self-interest, but service. With Wilson's guidance, America had transcended the past and human nature and reasons of state. Even after the war, after the golden moment of fulfillment for American service to humanity, Wilson explained that he and all Americans desired "to lift [this great nation] to yet higher levels of service and achievement."[28] The quest was never-ending.

Nearly as important as the ideal of service to Wilson's conception of national mission was his interpretation (or re-interpretation) of American history, especially the Founding, the Civil War, and, in general, the transcendent "meaning" of America in the unfolding of the divine plan. The fact that America's mission was written into history by the hand of Providence and could be plainly read in its national history meant for Wilson and many of his generation that America was accountable to obey the revelation of history. As Anders Stephanson concluded, Wilson believed that "certain individuals and nations are bound to lead because they have been privy to, or are embodiments of, the deeper provi-

[25] Wilson's reply to a delegation from the PCUSA, 19 June 1917, *PWW*, 42: 537.

[26] "An Address to the Senate," 10 July 1919, *PWW*, 61: 435 and passim.

[27] In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides identified honor, fear, and interests as the key causes of imperial rivalry, and Hobbes, who had translated Thucydides, wrote in *Leviathan* that states went to war for the sake of glory, safety, and competition. It is interesting to note that in Thucydides' account of the Melian Dialogue the Athenians claim that they are subduing the people of Melos for their (the Melians') benefit, a hint that Thucydides well understood the possibility of a democracy waging a war of service.

[28] "An Address to the Senate," 10 July 1919, 61: 436.

dential purposes of history."[29] Wilson took great care in his speeches to present a particular version of the American past, one that was useful in explaining why America had to be the servant of all humanity, why it had to purge itself of all base motives, why America had to enter the European war, and why it had to participate in the League of Nations.

*History distorted to justify universalist adventures.*

There is an interesting parallel here between Wilson's attempt in wartime to shape the American people's understanding of the meaning of their past and Abraham Lincoln's similar efforts during the Civil War. Each man tried to explain the significance of the present moment—and to rationalize war—in light of his reading of the intention of the Founders and of the universal applicability of the Declaration of Independence, specifically that the American bid for independence in 1776 was somehow tied up with the destiny of all humanity from that point forward. Wilson, typical of the Progressives, often quoted Lincoln, and, whether consciously or not, picked up vocabulary and metaphors from his predecessor's speeches, including the Gettysburg Address. Both Wilson and Lincoln hitched the Founding to the star of a powerful national *telos*. Wilson was a professionally trained academic (with a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins) who had published respected books on American history, government, and constitutionalism. He was no amateur in his handling of history; he knew what he was doing.

Consistently during his presidency Wilson developed the idea that America had been born to perfect and universalize ideals of freedom, democracy, self-government, and love of neighbor. In an address to members of the Federal Council of Churches in 1915, he explained America's *raison d'etre*: "[America's] object in the world, its only reason for existence as a government, was to show men the paths of liberty and of mutual serviceability, to lift the common man out of the paths, out of the slough of discouragement and even despair. . . ."[30] To be sure, America as example to the world, as the beacon of liberty, is a mission the Founders themselves embraced, but Wilson made it clear that he favored the active, interventionist, humanitarian role for America that had triumphed in the 1890s and became so dear to the social gospel

[29] *Manifest Destiny*, 114.

[30] 10 December 1915, *PWW*, 35: 335.

clergy. In the closing paragraph of his War Message (in which he promised not only to "make the world safe for democracy" but also to make "the world itself at last free") he drew inspiration from the famous pledge at the end of the Declaration of Independence, as if to say that Americans once again "dedicate our lives and our fortunes" for the sake of liberty. The war for liberty had not ended at Yorktown in 1781. Once again in her history "America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured."[31]

*United States transformed into permanently revolutionary nation.*

In his Thanksgiving proclamation for 1917, Wilson welcomed the unprecedented "opportunity to serve mankind" that the war had brought the American people. He anticipated the universalization of the earlier American triumph over a conspiratorial tyranny in "the great day of our Declaration of Independence" (careful, of course, not to mention the allied British Empire by name as the guilty tyrant). By entering the Great War America had accepted the challenge to achieve global victory for liberty "by taking up arms against a tyranny that threatened to master and debase men everywhere and joining with other free peoples in demanding for all the nations of the world what we then demanded and obtained for ourselves. In this day of the revelation of our duty not only to defend our own rights as a nation but to defend also the rights of free men throughout the world, there has been vouchsafed us in full and inspiring measure the resolution and spirit of united action."[32] Consistent with the mission to serve, this war was not primarily an action undertaken for American rights, or interests, or security (although Wilson mentioned Germany's very tangible threats to all of these), but ultimately for principles, for founding propositions, in the same way that for Lincoln at Gettysburg the Civil War was really the test of the founding proposition of equality. And Wilson and Lincoln both filtered the meaning of current history through their reading of the Declaration of Independence. Wilson's interpretation of the meaning of the American founding helped transform the United States into a permanently revolutionary nation, dedicated to the fulfillment of universalized abstractions on behalf of others, whatever the cost in blood and wealth.

[31] "An Address to a Joint Session of Congress," 2 April 1917, *PWW*, 41, 527.

[32] 7 November 1917, *PWW*, 44: 525.

In his enthusiasm for this version of the past, he even claimed at one Fourth of July oration that Britain herself now recognized with gratitude that the American Revolution had brought liberty to her own citizens as well. And at last that process of emancipation, begun in 1776, now culminated in "the spread of this revolt, this liberation, to the great stage of the world itself!"[33] The United States in 1918 was leading a world revolution against the Past, the very thing it was founded to do, according to Wilson's reading of providential history.

*Wilson saw nation he led as "an instrument in the hands of God."*

Wilson did not stop with the Founding, however; he also carefully wove the Civil War into his portrayal of American history as the progressive revelation of world redemption. He believed, he told a group of Confederate veterans in 1917, that the true purpose and meaning of the Union victory in the Civil War had to be read in the light of subsequent history. America had been providentially preserved for a knowable purpose: "We now at last see why this great nation was kept united, for we are beginning to see the great world purpose which it was meant to serve." The United States had preserved its own liberty and now as a belligerent power was "an instrument in the hands of God to see that liberty is made secure for mankind." Wilson, who habitually reversed the logic and sequence of cause and effect in history, derived the real meaning of the past from the present, of the Civil War from the later Great War: "We did not know that God was working out in His own way the method by which we should best serve human freedom—by making this nation a great, united, indivisible, indestructible instrument in His hands for the accomplishment of these great things."[34] American history was a clear and seamless revelation to Wilson, the meaning of the Old Testament waiting to be read in the New.

*Stars and stripes described as "flag . . . of humanity."*

In short, it seems that for Wilson American history and its principles and even its symbols belonged to all humanity. To think otherwise would have been the epitome of national selfishness, an unspeakable crime to the humanitarian internationalists of the Progressive Era. In a remarkable speech given *before* the outbreak of the European war in the summer of 1914, just days after the

[33] "Address at Mt. Vernon," 4 July 1918, *PWW*, 48: 517.

[34] "Remarks to Confederate Veterans in Washington," 5 June 1917, *PWW*, 42: 452-453.

assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Wilson stood in front of Independence Hall in Philadelphia on the Fourth of July and claimed that since the United States was the champion of "the rights of humanity" then its "flag is the flag, not only of America, but of humanity."[35] He divorced the symbolism of the flag's colors and stars and stripes from their historical meaning and reinvented the banner as a universal symbol for the freedom of all mankind—an audacious claim of boundless national mission.

It is arguable that Wilson's conception of the American mission was so expansive that it prevented him from seeing the proper limits of American involvement abroad. He spoke often, either directly or indirectly, of there being no price too great in lives and resources for the sake of service to humanity. By themselves, these statements are not particularly striking, but taken together as an indication of a habit of mind, they are alarming. In 1915 he defined patriotism as a citizen's living for the common good even "though it be to the point of utter sacrifice of himself and everything that is involved."[36] Again, in his War Message, he pledged "the whole force of the Nation" to defeat Germany.[37] Later in 1917, he promised a limitless vindication of service over selfishness: "Now we are going to lay all our wealth, if necessary, and spend all our blood, if need be, to show that we were not accumulating that wealth selfishly but were accumulating it for the service of mankind."[38] In light of the horrific slaughter on the Somme and at Verdun in 1916, these repeated promises of unlimited expenditure of men and resources were not merely rhetorical flourishes. They need to be heard in the context of the desperate suffering of the Western Front. In a subsequent speech explaining the significance of the Fourteen Points peace plan, he claimed once again that the American people "are ready to devote their lives, their honor, and everything that they possess" to the enduring principles of universal justice.[39] When, a few months later, Bolshevik Russia withdrew from the war as an Allied power, closing down the Eastern Front and strengthening Germany's defensive and offensive capacity, Wilson vowed "Force, Force to the utmost, Force without stint

[35] *PWW*, 30: 254.

[36] "Address to the Gridiron Club," 11 December 1915, *PWW*, 35: 343.

[37] "An Address to a Joint Session of Congress," 2 April 1917, *PWW*, 41: 525.

[38] "Remarks to Confederate Veterans," 5 June 1917, *PWW*, 42: 453.

[39] "An Address to a Joint Session of Congress," 8 January 1918, *PWW*, 45: 539.

or limit, the righteous and triumphant Force which shall make Right the law of the world, and cast every selfish dominion in the dust."[40]

Wilson was evidently willing to expend unlimited time, resources, and lives to achieve the American mission, but he did not stop there. He also defined unlimited goals for the war. This was no ordinary war, according to Wilson; it was the last war, the fulfillment of history, "the culminating and final war for human liberty"[41]—a war fought without boundaries of time and space, fought against every foe to liberty, everywhere necessary. The war would end not through limiting objectives, not through negotiation or compromise or stalemate, but in final victory and permanent peace. Wilson would not stop short of that goal, he informed the Pope in the summer of 1917 in reply to the Vatican's proposal for a negotiated settlement. If the final solution to imperial ambition and militarism were not found now, he averred, then the democratic nations would have to fight an even greater war of redemption in the future.[42] Similarly, if the League of Nations failed, he warned the Senate in 1919, then "there must be another and a final war and the world must be swept clean of every power that could renew the terror."[43] The final, apocalyptic confrontation was sure to come, and it was up to the free peoples of the world to decide if the Great War had been the final conflict, the final resolution of the world-historical struggle between freedom and autocracy. If this really was America's mission, then logically, morally, there could be no compromise.

Departing from the Founders' idea of mission, Wilson perpetuated the messianic impulse of Romantic nationalism evident first in the radical phase of the French Revolution and then in Poland, Italy, and Germany in the nineteenth century. He dedicated American foreign policy to the moralizing, redemptive "uplift" of humanity and to the gospel of service. His presidency, therefore, clearly marks a turning point in U.S. history. As Robert Nisbet wrote, "Ever since Wilson, with only rarest exceptions, American foreign policy has been tuned not to national interests but to national morality." "Wilson above any other figure," Nisbet contin-

[40] Quoted in McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State*, 183.

[41] "An Address to a Joint Session of Congress," 8 January 1918, *PWW*, 45: 539.

[42] "Reply to the Pope's Peace Proposal," 27 August 1917, PWW, 44: 57-59.

[43] "An Address to the Senate," 10 July 1919, PWW, 61: 434.

ued, "is the patriarch of American foreign policy moralism and interventionism."[44] Under Wilson, America lost its will to restrain the redemptive, interventionist impulse to be the "Christ-Nation." That deliberative will and self-restraint had been impaired by the crusading of the 1890s, but was destroyed by the Wilsonian gospel of service. In the 1930s, historian Albert Weinberg cut through Wilson's "humanitarian imperialism" and "ethical interventionism" to see the danger he posed to any sense of limits in foreign policy. Thinking primarily of Wilson's intervention in Latin America and the Caribbean, Weinberg wrote that

> The most radical imperialist . . . is apt to be the one most devoted to liberty. His exalted moral consciousness may destroy conscience itself in the sense that *it removes all sense of limitations upon the means of attaining an ideal.* Imperialism is even less troubling to the ethical interventionist than to the ethical expansionist, the former being reassured by the assumption that his infringement of sovereignty is but a temporary inconsistency which will eventuate in greater democracy.[45]

*"Exalted moral consciousness may destroy conscience itself."*

Despite this tendency, some of the best-known studies of the idea of mission in American history fail to see an outward-directed mission as dangerous. Edward McNall Burns's Cold War-era treatment of mission in American history, while critical of the uses made of the American mission, does not see it as inherently dangerous; rather, it needed only to be channeled intelligently, humanely, and productively. The impulse to spread "liberty, equality, democracy, and peace" to humanity was still valid and appropriate in the 1950s. But while Burns called for America to lead the way to humanitarian internationalism, he was enough of a realist to recognize that "internationalism in this country has commonly taken the form of interventionism."[46] Frederick Merk, writing soon after Burns and drawing on his work, distinguished between Manifest Destiny and mission, seeing Manifest Destiny as the spirit of conquest, while mission was alien to imperialism

[44] Robert Nisbet, *The Present Age: Progress and Anarchy in Modern America* (New York: Harper & Row/Perennial, 1989), 29, 30.

[45] Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny,* 437. Emphasis added.

[46] Burns, *The American Idea of Mission,* 268, 359-360. Writing in the 1950s, Burns believed that "purged of its dross of conceit and illusion, the mission of America remains one of the noblest expressions of idealism that any nation has embraced. What it needs most of all is more wisdom and tolerance in carrying it out" (359).

and simply the impulse "to redeem the Old World by high example." He rightly interpreted mission as helping to propel Congress toward intervention in 1917, but saw the spirit of intervention as consistent with an inspiring, idealistic, and selfless mission in contrast to the crude grasping of Manifest Destiny.[47] But this distinction is too tidy. As Lee Tuveson correctly pointed out, mission is a complex and self-contradictory idea, and it was often linked in the American mind with continental expansion and imperialism. Tuveson discerned two competing expressions of American mission: the vision of America as a "New Eden" destined to lead the world by example and of America as a militant, millennialist "New Israel" destined to build a kingdom through righteous conquest.[48]

*Divine attributes of Christ reassigned to nation.*

This distinction is helpful, but even the phrase "New Israel" does not capture the shift in America's self-understanding after the 1890s that came with overseas empire and was then solidified with intervention in World War I, namely, the Messianic vision of America as the "Christ-Nation." In the spirit of Romantic nationalists like Mazzini, who sacralized the modern nation-state by transferring to it the whole vocabulary of the Church and redemption, Wilson reassigned the divine attributes of Christ to the American nation: the U.S. was the Mediator, the light of the world, the peacemaker, the bringer of salvation.[49] Historian Walter McDougall, while not using the term "Christ-Nation," perceptively divided the history of American foreign policy into an "Old Testament" of prudent exceptionalism and self-restraint and a "New Testament" of ideological interventionism and missionary zeal. America's leaders embraced a crusading foreign policy in 1898, "whereupon they began to draft a New Testament that did admonish Americans to go forth and do good among nations."[50]

It is quite possible that this "New Testament" redemptive mission, evident in many nations prior to 1914, helped prepare the imagination of Europe and the United States for total war. No one can sensibly deny that modern industrial technology made possible the scale of destruction and of the loss of life in the First World War. What must also be understood, however, is how the

[47] Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History*, 3, 262-263, 265-266.
[48] Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 131.
[49] See Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, 117.
[50] McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State*, 11, 37.

great powers, including the United States, had the capacity of will to use this technology against each other. An ungoverned sense of mission may be part of the explanation for this unbridled willingness. At the deepest spiritual level, mission may help account for the magnitude of the Great War. At the very least, it is the key to the spiritual core of the war. The pervasive sense of mission in Europe and America may have intensified and protracted the Great War. As an abstract, Manichean conflict between Good and Evil, light and dark, redemption and perdition, the Great War fed on each combatant's exaggerated national self-image, twisted caricature of the enemy, inflated meaning of the war, and unlimited promises for the outcome of the battle.

A comprehensive comparative analysis of the idea of mission in the century leading up to the First World War is needed to understand the extent to which mission helped cause the war, or, more likely, helped intensify the war. All of these competing missions seem to have been to greater or lesser degree a distortion, secularization, or, in Wilson's case, a gnostic hyper-spiritualization of the authentic Christian mission, the evangelical duty to advance the Kingdom of God. But it may turn out that the "doctrinal" content of these various competing national creeds was less important than the fact of the existence of competing missions in the first place, that is, of the breakup of mission (whether ancient Roman or Christian or both) into rival missions. It may matter less what each of the great powers believed or said it was doing than the fact that each nation was, in Irving Babbitt's phrase, "living expansively," without restraint on appetite—"beautiful souls" locked in mortal combat to realize their separate missions of world redemption.

*If every nation is the Church, every opponent is a heretic or infidel.*

Sixteen hundred years ago, St. Augustine warned against the inherent idolatry of empire. To assign to one's earthly nation the mission that by right belongs only to the Kingdom of Christ is to be guilty of the worst of disordered loves. If every nation is Rome, then every opponent is Carthage awaiting destruction, and every battle a heroic campaign to destroy the last impediment to imperial destiny. If every nation is the Church, then every opponent is a heretic or infidel, and every engagement a crusade for orthodoxy or for the liberation of the Holy Land. If every nation is the City of God, the New Jerusalem come down out of heaven, then every enemy is the Babylonian whore, and every victory a defeat for the

City of Man. If every great power is the "Christ-nation," then every adversary is Satan, and every battle Armageddon. Under these conditions, no limit, no compromise, no negotiation is possible. Each nation obeys its own Great Commission to go into all the world and preach its gospel and to make disciples of every nation—even if it means baptizing them in blood.

*A more modest mission.*

Woodrow Wilson mentally inhabited an impossible place and tried to wage war to achieve an impossible peace for that impossible place. He sought finality, perfect resolution, permanence, and universality in a temporal world of contingency, conflict, disappointment, transience, and boundaries. He sought to redeem the world by universalizing the American principles of consent of the governed, self-determination, and democracy. Since Wilson's time, the American mission has become in some ways even more abstract, attenuated, vague, and secularized. Now we are told that America is an "idea"—as if that fragment of mission alone can explain and justify any military action around the globe. But is there an idea of mission that is not idolatrous or that is not the product of a diseased imagination? If so, then this is the only kind of mission worth salvaging and reviving. Perhaps that mission is the more modest hope of the Founders that America would serve as an example of successful self-government, prospering under the rule of law, protected by a constitutional regime of limited and defined powers, fearful of the "lovers of humanity," and unembarrassed by a foreign policy based on national interests.